

Between What Is and What Is to Be, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. A2051204
Isaiah 40: 1-11 and Mark 1:1-8
Elon Community Church, 4 December, 2005

Our cat Shalie had quite an interesting time a few days ago. Curiously and nervously, she perched on the back of the recliner chair in the living room as we dragged out boxes that contained a Christmas tree, lights and decorations. With wonder, she watched the traditional artificial tree take shape before her very eyes. With lustful desire in her eye, she saw the shiny sparkling ornaments dangle tantalizingly from the branches of the tree. But, she sprang for safety as the vacuum cleaner roared into action, sweeping up the scattered droppings of needles, boughs and packing material. The roaring machine cleaned up everything in its way and made a path for the advent of expected guests later that evening.

We are in a time of transition: a time of preparation; a time in between. It is a time between the seasons of Thanksgiving and Christmas. Even the weather joins in the in-between-ness. It does not know if it is supposed to be summer or fall.

This in between time is a curious and nervous time, both exciting and scary, just as that day was for our cat. The secular world calls these days the “holiday” season. (Little do they know that the word *holiday* comes from the words “holy day,” but we know that!) In the holiday season, we physically get our homes ready by decorating and cleaning. We join the crowds in the shopping malls and get excited as we hear the canned versions of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” and my all time least-favorite, “Have a Holy Jolly Christmas.” If we’re lucky, we might hear one or two renditions of Christmas carols— you know, where the words “Jesus” or “savior” are actually mentioned out loud. We purchase or prepare presents for others, anticipating their excitement and joy as they unpack the special gift we have carefully and lovingly chosen for them, and we excitedly wonder what gifts we might receive during this season.

However, the holiday season is also scary as we realize we don’t have everything ready yet. “Give me another week to get everything in order,” we say. What is most disappointing about the secular “holiday season” is that when December Twenty-fifth arrives, Christmas is all over. The paper and boxes go out to the trash to be carried away. The toys and gifts will soon be forgotten, either broken or stored away. The holiday carols are over. The stores tear down their holiday items and decorate for the January white sales.

As Christians, on the other hand, we are called to celebrate the season of “Advent.” This word derives from a Latin word meaning *arrival*. We await the arrival of the messiah, the Christ. When the Christ comes, we sing the Christmas carols: “Joy to the World, the Lord is Come;” “O Come, Let us Adore Him;” and “Glory to the newborn King.”

Advent means God’s savior will arrive in our lives and in our world. We can sing these carols because we know the savior will remain with us, showing us the way on our path through this life.

Psalmist, prophet, and John the Baptist all challenge us to not passively wait, but to actually prepare the way of this coming savior. We have work to do, and it’s not so much physical work like decorating and purchasing and wrapping. Rather, it is spiritual preparation, and it involves thinking, and meditating and introspecting. It might involve speaking and listening.

We are called to create a path on which the savior can walk. Picture a path. It winds its way across a hillside and down through a valley. In contrast to a huge superhighway cut through rocky ridges, the path follows the contours of the ground. It passes among the trees and creeks and rocks. It is peaceful and invites conversation with God’s creation. On that path, we can hear the

leaves rustle in the wind, the birds sing their songs, and we know that we belong to something much larger than we ourselves are. On that path, we recognize the fact that we are a part of God's realm.

A superhighway speeds us in our isolated automobile toward a destination. Last week, I was grateful to have interstate roads so I could quickly get to my meeting in Hillsborough and back again. A path, on the other hand, is slower. It sets us on a journey, and the journey *is* the destination.

The Psalmist in Psalm Eighty-five describes the path. Righteousness will make a path for the Lord's steps. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet on this path, and righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

This is a path on which we can be comforted and settled, but work is involved. John the Baptist urges us to prepare this path of peace by repenting: by honestly looking at ourselves and discovering our sinfulness and asking for forgiveness. Fleming Rutledge, writing in the *Christian Century*,¹ says that sinfulness often includes a lot of covering up. "We are too often afraid to look at ourselves and uncover our faults: families that will not acknowledge the alcoholism that is destroying them, people who are making their loved ones miserable but will not go to a therapist, business partners who cover up for each other."

Advent is the season of the uncovering. It is only when we uncover our sinfulness that we will find comfort and peace. Spiritual work, involving prayer and Bible study, will begin to clear the path for the messiah to come into our lives. Introspection will help us uncover our faults and address them. We will be better able to compare our lives to the ideals spoken of by the prophets and taught by Jesus.

This time in-between is a confusing and dangerous and uncomfortable time. It is the time between what *is* and what *is to be*. It is the time between the present cultural human condition and the coming reign of God, and we don't know exactly how things are going to turn out. Like cats, we watch with wary eyes the unfolding of events. With lustful desire, we gaze upon shiny sparkling ornamentation. Promises of financial wealth and security dangle tantalizingly before us.

The reality of what is is characterized by Hurricane Katrina victims voicing their outrage at a sluggish bureaucratic response. Confusion reigns as we witness the struggle between huge corporate profits and the people of the underdeveloped world who suffer from child-labor and mineral exploitation. What do justice, faithfulness, and righteousness have to say in the reality of such a world?

What is to be is characterized by a table set in our presence with bread and grape juice, a table to which all people are invited. With wonder, we can watch as God's realm begins to take shape before our eyes. We are glad the year is nearing an end, but skeptical about what lies ahead. Like our cat, we watch with a wary eye. Isaiah said, "See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him."²

Somewhere in this Advent process, there is that vacuum cleaner. God will come with might to sweep up our scattered droppings: the messes we have produced. But, unlike our cat, we don't need to scurry away in fear. God will feed the flock like a shepherd, and will gather the lambs and carry them in God's bosom, and gently lead them.

This is an in-between time: a time of preparation, of anticipation, of fear, but also a time of expectation, joy and comfort. Open your hearts, and be fed by the good shepherd.

¹*The Christian Century* November 17-24, 1999

²Isaiah 40:10